THE MOON'S MIRACLE.

As when, to warn proud cities, war appears
Waged in the troubled sky, and armies rush
To battle in the clouds; before each van
Prick forth the aery knights, and couch their spears,
Till thickest legions close; with feats of arms
From either end of heaven the welkin burns.
Paradise Lost, Book II. 533.

How the Count saw a city in the sky and men in harness issuing thereout—Of the encampment of the host of the moonsmen—Of how the battle was joined—The Count's great joy thereat and of how the fight sped.

THE housekeeper's matronly skirts had sounded upon the staircase. The maids had simpered their timid 'Good-night, sir,' and were to bed. Nevertheless, the Count still sat imperturbable and silent. A silence of frowns, of eloquence on the simmer; a silence that was almost a menace.

'Bed-time, Count,' I suggested.

His thinking had dishevelled his hair. He peered at me with wrathful disapprobation. 'How glum,' he muttered, 'how desperately glum!' and again fell silent.

'I fancied that it was getting late,' said I. 'Late, late?' he grunted, 'am I the slave of the clock? Bed for old women.'

'May I ask what is wrong, sir?' said I.

The floodgates were opened.

'I am in the blues, boy, unfathomable. All is wrong: that I am old and full of wear, that Life, the sorceress, is wearying of me; soon she will play the jilt. And here I sit, cudgelling my jaded brains for to evade the one event. But even the Count is mortal, and his palace of youth evanished in a golden mist of memories. Now the worms' banqueting hour is at hand, now wails the Banshee.' The Count was smiling and frowning. He limped over to me and sat down beside me, under the candles at the window.

'I am in the blues, boy; call it what you will—indigestion or home-sickness of soul. The green of the past is out of sight, the pitiless sands of old age stretch out to the brink—and a certain Bird is patient.' He leaned forward and tapped me upon the knee. 'I will fight,' said he between his teeth, 'fingers against beak till the white bones show.'

Then back was flung his head with his familiar guffaw. 'Tut! here am I lavishing my hoarded experience on a raw youth who sucks at his book as though it were the fruit of the tree of Life. Laughing, are you? So am I. It is the candles, the candles, the candles. They conjure up musty shrines and greedy heirs. Shut your book, raw youth, and draw aside the curtains; we will hob a nob with the moon.'

The moon was high above the housetop, so that only a faint twilight trickled into the room; but, upon the grassy stretch of common, whose skirt was twinkling fair with distant lamps, she shone cold and bleak. The trees, indecorously clothed this autumn-time, feebly shivered in their rags. Upon the other side the common, over against the Swan Pond, the potboy was putting up the shutters of the 'Green Man'; and, as he drew to an end, one by one its lights went out as a man might shut his eyes. And when this landmark was thus silently withdrawn, it seemed that we were suddenly left the sole companions of the night.

The Count drew a deep breath. 'How good!' said he, 'how good! 'Tis a blue bowl of moonlight; let us drink to the dregs. 'Gad! a mere eyeshot of my Wimbledon is a recompense for all our woe. A lovable rogue is life, but a jilt, a jilt.' He surveyed the world with a mother's eyes. One by one, in the silence, our neighbour's cocks began to crow. The Count's face grew merry again.

'Now the cocks do shout the midnight,' he chaunted. 'How quiet is the air! but yet I'll wager to a keener ear a thousand fairy harps are rippling. And mark you that crook-backed elm; what a pose, a personality she has in her tattered petticoat. You would think—but Dryads are out of fashion in this age of gilt.' (I was listening now with little attention.) 'Sing hey for shrewd Mrs. Grundy though she see no farther than the Ultimate Plumes. Down soul, down! and out of the drawing-room. So the gaffer's tongue wags, for equivocation must drown doubt; yet had I a tittle of certainty (just the glimmer of a ghost) I would ecstatically die and my hearse should be a veritable Car of Triumph. Alas! many an old comrade have I seen swagger into eternity, but never a one has bugled clear to me from his shadowy bourne.' ('It is an optical delusion,' I muttered.) 'Are their eagle spirits snuffed out into blindness and silence? Do they——?'

Out of the misty far away rose the mere echo of a cockcrow.

'Whist!' said I, 'whist!'

The Count's rhapsody was cut short. We stood agape at the window.

The North-West brought it forth. In this direction alongside of the roadway, is a row of poplars. And it was just here, above their topmost twigs, that, when the Count was in the midst of his talking, I saw the first sign in the sky. 'Mirage,' said the Count curtly, polishing the glass with his sleeve. His aged grey eyes were wide-open as a child's at a Christmas tree. 'A thing common enough, common enough, but——' A policeman loosely sauntering on the pathway overlooked by the house, to my astonishment, seemed to notice nothing uncommon. I was near calling out to him as street boys call to one another at the appearance of a balloon. But in the weighing of the matter in my mind I let him saunter on, out of hearing. When he was well gone I was glad to have kept silence. The intense stillness of the city's surreption of the night-sky for a while assured me of its unreality; but soon it was impossible so to think. Out of space the city had risen upon us. Out of the night she sallied forth like a bride.

'Look, look!' said the Count hotly. The city was now hovering at a span above the Home for the Dying. A sudden light shone in a window to the north. Maybe it was set shining by a mother fetching milk for her baby or by some one awakened out of nightmare, for soon it was extinguished. 'The silence is like a wary beast,' said the Count. 'D'ye think, is it the dust of the air (my eyes are dim), or do I see men moving upon the ramparts and busy about the gates? That pinnacle grows clearer every minute; it pricks the sky. Really it is very odd. What? what says the boy? And yet, mark you, not an inch of it is moonlit. Some inner light glimmers upon the stone, or a sister moon is prowling in her rear.' 'Men, men!' said I. Very slowly the world's circumference dipped in the sky until the city hung free of all earthly excrescences, as though she were swinging by a cord, as swings a seagull, out of space. Like a huge, still summer-cloud lazily lolling on the horizon near before sunset was the city, save that upon her walls and buildings was the light of a wintry dawn fluttering.

Presently winged men in a multitude were to be clearly seen, and also upon the right of the main gate flanked by smooth turrets, a multitude of horsemen likewise with outstretching wings. Again I searched the common that I might point out the wonder to some chance passer-by and be convinced. To me it

seemed a traitorous deed to extinguish the candle of science in a breath, to trample Newton's grave. A woman upon a seat near at hand was inert and asleep; none stirred anywhere. But while my eyes went vainly roaming the extremities of the common they lighted upon slow moving blotches in the darkness of the North-East. These I pointed out to the Count. 'My field-glasses in the green leather case,' said he. 'In the old cabinet,' said I. But neither of us stirred a pace from the window. 'Horsemen? yes, horsemen!' said I; 'how they ride!' 'Like secrets,' said the Count. Soon, it was a difficult matter to keep watch on all these things. The concourse of people about the city's gates was increasing. Mustered in rigid order, they stood like an army prepared for battle. For a little while I was apprehensive lest a trumpet should sound and should wake the world, fetching men and women, all in a panic, in nightcap and gown, from the warren of houses into this open place.

But no sound fell. The vast assemblage was silent. The horsemen upon the sky's verge were making stealthy progress. Clearly some tumult was toward. 'Such business means the devil to pay,' said the Count. 'No peaceable city that, my friend. See how tense is the bustle, even the watching of it clenches the fists. I know the heart-gnaw, the rat at the pit of the stomach. Chut! my pension for new blood. Every man of 'em writes hazard in every movement. If that be an outflanking ruse,' he continued, pointing a ludicrously gaunt finger towards the left, 'the enemy must be encamped in mid-sky. They go the pace. Mettlesome beasts they be. And observe the order, line upon line, with nice interspacing. Mark the ease of their seat, horse and man—one, like a hawk, confident of every wrought muscle. Line upon line they ride, hugging the shadow. A fit body of men—and the beasts!' 'Ay,' said I, 'you are right, Count, it is a rear attack. They are making profit of the earth's shadow. Their accoutrements are dull too. Are they not purpureal, sir? 'Cute enough!' 'In night khaki,' said the Count, like one inspired. 'Yes,' said I, 'you are right. The enemy must be in mid-sky, overhead.' We turned quick, the one towards the other. 'Round about the moon!' we shouted together.

Pretty certainly we were to be justified of our surmise, unless, far Westward, out of the world's ken, lay their goal. The Count was already hurrying out of the room. In his heat and

boisterous haste he overstrained his leg, but, careless of the pain, and leaning upon my arm while he flourished the candle on high in his left hand to light our way (and assist the placid scrutiny of his ancestors), he pushed forward down the passage. The eyes of the pictures were exceeding dull painted it seemed to me. ('I owe them this night,' was the Count's rebuke of my levity.) On our way, because of the bend in the hall-way, we saw the dwarf city speed, as it were, across the fanlight of the door. 'Ha! d'ye see, a manœuvre to the sou'-west, too?' said the Count. In our anxiety to shoot back the bolts of the door, we much incommoded one another, whereupon the Count fiercely swore at me in a flurry of anger. He was another man. With the forethought that is sometimes twin with excitement, I seized a mackintosh which hung upon a peg at the doorway, and with this followed near after the Count, who, impatient of my help, with never a step without a groan, was wrathfully hobbling down the steps into the garden. In our short absence, the walls and towers of the sky-city had waxed plainer yet. But, though nearer at hand, the very war men's faces were discernible, yet the utmost limits of the city I could not see, since round about her the stars were obscured; for there hovered London's smoke. And now we were free of the shadow of the house. By clambering upon the stone pilasters near by the yews where lies the stable-yard, we could sight nigh the whole firmament. Here, simultaneously, we bleated amazement at the tents of the army encamped about the moon.

The tents were of divers pale colours, some dove-grey, others saffron and moth-green, and those on the farther side, of the colour of pale violets, and all pitched in a vast circle whose centre was the moon. I handed the mackintosh to the Count and insisted upon his donning of it. 'The dew hangs in the air,' said I; 'and unless the world spin on too quick we shall pass some hours in watching.' 'Ay,' said he in a muse, 'but it seems to me the moon-army keeps infamous bad watch. I see not one sentinel. Those wings travel sure as a homing bird; and to be driven back upon their centre would be defeat for the—lunatics. Give *me* but a handful of such cavalry, I would capture the Southern Cross. Magnificent! magnificent! I remember when I was in——' For, while he was yet deriding, from points a little distant apart, single, winged horsemen dropped from the far sky, whither, I suppose, they had soared to keep more efficient watch; and

though we heard no whisper of sound, by some means (inaudible bugle call, positively maintains the Count) the camp was instantly roused and soon astir like seething broth. Tents were struck and withdrawn to the rear. Arms and harness, bucklers and gemmy helms sparkled and glared. All was orderly confusion.

It was just now that a little breeze moved, lifting the hair upon my head and letting it fall. By-and-by it came again, fluttered, and fell; and again, like the breath of a Polar bear. Soon it blew briskly and steadily. 'Put up your collar, Count,' said I. 'Fortune defend us from rain!'

So gently was the city ascending that it seemed she was being wafted onward by the gentle wind. In a little while she emerged quite out of the haze and revealed to us her remoter pinnacles and towers, fair and lucid, and of gossamer airiness. Her course was not the moon's course, and at no time did she rise many degrees above the skyline. Her progress (whither, who can say?) must have been very slow, so much my bones on the morrow painfully testified, but zest is time's sharpest rowel, and when morn came, putting out the vision, the night seemed only too soon to have come to an end.

This while the Count, in his own conceit, was Commander-in-Chief of the celestial aliens. He growled commands, stormed, and soliloquised. He squandered his virile vocabulary upon trembling *aides-de-camp*. His pose was heroic. In his dun mackintosh, at attention—so far as his leg would permit him—upon his own gatepost he cut a figure droll enough.

In some measure his isolation warranted his boast. As fortunate as inexplicable was our solitude. Even the woman, to whom we were now come near, was not at all disturbed, but lay fast asleep, her face upturned to the pale sky, quite regardless of the miracle, grossly unabashed by these 'minions of the moon.' Perhaps she entertained in her dreams other visitors—silks, and ease, and plenty—as rare and as pleasing.

Upon the Count and the sleeper, however, I wasted little attention. Troop after troop of horse, of somewhat gloomy equipment, were defiling between the gates of the city; some to join the main body, now distent in a crescent, some to spread fanwise on either flank of the moon-army. It chanced, moreover, that while I was watching there fell a lull in the procession; those horsemen who were just beyond the portal looked back and sharply drew in against the wall; and, presently after, a rider with cloak

astream, bearing despatches (perchance) from one in authority or from council convened in secret debate, burst solitary and precipitate out of the shadow, curved upward, dwindled to a spark under the sprawling Bear, went out—and the horsemen trooped on orderly between the city gates.

The contingents despatched before, whom we had espied on the horizon, had seized the South, and with tight rein were stretching in towards the centre, driving before them isolated stragglers ('scouts,' said the Count) of the moon-army. This latter, constantly being recruited by these few and others from above, was now swollen to quite formidable bulk.

'How are the chances, Count?' said I.

'I like it not, I like it not,' said he, astutely wagging his head. I wonder,' he continued, 'if a cockcrow would reach their ears! England expects! *Ma foi*, what city is this of marvellous architecture? Now it minds me of a black pearl, now of a dreamed Babylon. I say, I say!'

'What now?' said I. A troop of horse was wheeling in the black north in stealthiest fashion.

'See you there? See you the main gate?' said the Count, with antic gesticulations.

'The main gate?' said I. One of my men had fallen headlong.

'Yes,' said the Count; 'yes; well, look back, fifty yards or so, to that sheeny dome where the grey birds are fluttering; now to the right a little—ken ye a turret? It is the king; it is the king.'

I left watching my troop, and followed his directions. Near by the ramparts, in full view of the battlefield, upon a turret, was a little gorgeous company, with heads sapiently inclined each to each, gossiping together with restrained gestures; and a little afore them upon that turret, alone, a man, very sombre and regal and elect. Whether king or city mayor or grand vizier. 'Ho!' bawled the Count, 'old lamps for new.' No answer came. 'Sky wolves,' he howled in a frenzy, 'birds of battle, show us of things. Turn your faces agleam. Whence came you out? Is time there? Passes the night? Ho, Ho, Ho!'

We waited for but the stir of a finger to betray them; but, even did they hear, they took no heed. Indeed, it seemed that all the combatants were clean without knowledge of the earth. Theirs only was the Universe. If I may again quote the Count:

'Why, sir, even the camp followers are Napoleons'—which is fanciful, but this is just. 'I have walked the world this three-score and ten, and to-night see soldiers.'

Soldiers indeed they were; their callous persistency, their vigorous order and array, and their trim machinal manœuvres alarmed me (down here in safety) not a little. But this not so much as the silence. For not until near break of day did the wind grow turbulent, and bluster and grumble at the chimney tops, and shrill in the bare twigs. Meanwhile the small voice of a cricket in the stable-wall sounded continuously in my ear, although my eyes were dazzled and giddy, and my wits in a maze with watching of the ever-moving host. I wondered at the Count's temerity. 'Ah,' said he, 'my uncle the Major would have enjoyed this! Their wings beat in my heart. Do but put out a finger, it would touch them. Bah, blockheads! blockheads! Stretch him against a wall. I will have 'em all courtmartialled. Skirted misses! Weanlings! Ha, a devilish fine fellow! He knows his business, he knows his business.' Thus the Count dittied, now to the skies, now to me.

Slowly, in an icy silence, the armies drew together. Of a thousand warriors of old, spent, heart-sick Sisera alone came to my mind and Deborah's Song of Victory—'They fought from heaven; the stars in their courses fought against Sisera,' thrilled down the centuries to the clap of timbrels, as though I had been the traitress Jael herself. Indeed, myself was fanatical, up in arms. Doubtless our cramped position, the cold, the solitude, and the seeing of nought earthly but here a tree-top, now a glossy roof, in some measure cut us off from life's corporeity, gave us wings; it is, nevertheless, remarkable that these extramundane noctivagators should have so convinced us that (as the Count said) this fat, palpable, complacent world suddenly grew spectre-thin and stalked out of reality into a mist of dreams. We were like flies upon the ceiling of a ball-room watching the motley festivities, save that the feet of the dancers (the celestial hosts) trod our air. How vast seemed the circuit of the skies.

'I give them twenty minutes to get into action,' said the Count.

The minutes passed exceeding slowly. The night was wind-swept and very clear; everything plotted to assist and entrance our observation. Hitherto, we had been quite undisturbed, but when a half of the Count's twenty minutes was gone by,

suddenly I heard a loud shouting. I looked with some vexation across the common; a man with his hands clapped upon his head was violently running over the grass, crying out shrilly as he ran. 'Here's a wretch at last who calls "Fall on us,"' said the Count. The intruder came on with many a stumble and now and then a fall, for the moon played tricks with her shadows upon the unequal ground. 'Hollo,' I shouted, 'hold your tongue—hold your tongue!' The intruder threw back his head with a gasp (he was then twenty paces distant), and seeing that the sudden voice was human and not, as he might think, from the clouds, quickly trotted towards us and soon was cowering at the pedestal, his hand upon the Count's boot. The Count was on a roar, and roared the louder when the woman, awakened by the fellow's clamour, put back her head to yawn, and saw the sky. She waited not to scream, but lifting her skirts that they should not impede her, whipped round and in a wink was nimbly footing it over the grass towards this, the only haven, like a startled bat. When she reached us, she hid her face in a corner of her ulster and gabbled incessantly, like a woman possessed. 'Chut! hold your tongue, ma'am,' said the Count testily, 'you desecrate the silence.' Her voice fell to a low continuous moaning. The street musician, for such was the first-comer, after the first flush of terror, quickly recovered his wits. In high feather he perched himself upon the stable-wall, and thence commanded a wider view to the South than ourselves. This he used to advantage, crying us news when detachments thereabouts swooped out of our sight. Nor were we the only watchers: the walls of the night-begotten city were black with still onlookers viewing the battle from afar off.

Now the last moment was come. My heart stood still in panic expectancy. Even the Count henceforward held his peace; even things inanimate seemed to bow beneath the burden of the silence; and the trees crouched under the moving skies like huddled beasts at the thunder. All sudden the blood gushed warm in my body. All sudden a weltering wave of horsemen rocked against the stars. Then the armies of the sky met.

Now at full speed, in silence, the nightsmen swept down upon the moonsmen, surging in their onslaught almost within touch of the moon. Now steadily with grim stubbornness, in silence of deep seas, the moonsmen drove back their assailants and falling and leaping, leaping and falling, regained their magic circle. The sky was rimpled over with galloping horsemen as foam rides in on

wind-beaten waves. The spark-spitting hoofs, the pulse of moonlit wings, the fury of brandished weapons, though without sound, rang in my inward ears. All this night the moon wended her steep way in a girdle of glittering warriors.

Albeit here was the very acme of the battle, yet to me the outlying troops of horsemen far down in the heavens until they almost grazed roof, were more engrossing. Sometimes in one of these petty fights most ingenious tactics were evident. Like falcon and heron, two would flutter, swoop, hover, fall; in a trice, without a sound. Such a duel as this took place immediately above our heads. Even the woman, seated upon the Count's mackintosh, left her wailing and thereafter gave little rest to her small quick eyes.

Now a vehement squadron sped higher, highmost until the sight yearned in vain. Now a luckless horseman in the full heat of fight fell like a meteor into our unfriendly air and silently, like a meteor, disappeared. Fleet soaring skirmishers, slow compact regiments, disarrayed frenzied fugitives, hither and thither, to and fro, put out the stars and filled the air with lightnings. Without sound, undaunted, and more gloriously ablaze in their swift decadence, a thousand fell out of silence into nothingness. And if a legion in grim magnificence should in its tactics droop from on high to within some few spire-lengths of the earth, then a giant shadow would sweep the moonbeams from the dewy grass, and would transiently dull the glitter of the Count's round eyes. I noticed, also, more than once, that at some extreme point of vantage the troops would muster innumerably until, like a wolf-harried flock, a tangled tumultuous mass would rear itself fantastically upon the horizon, and ere long, trembling, would sink out of sight.

Once, a bird, out of the ivy of the house, with low chirrups of dismay, went fluttering from tree to tree—it seemed like a voice from the dead. Ever and anon, the eye, debauched with movement, returned to that silent city, black with her people upon her walls, whom every accident of the fight, whether of victory or defeat, visibly moved. ('Alack, the brave mothers!' said the Count.) The king, too, austere and motionless, with finger upon cheek—his brain, I wager, on an itch to be doing—was a sight for young eyes. 'My friend,' afterwards said the Count, 'I almost wept that I was not a boy!' All the night through the battle waged and the moon fell lower towards her setting: all the night through silent battalions sped and met

and scattered: all the night through the 'pedestalled' Count, and the woman, and the street musician, and I myself, in a little company, watched the wonder. Throughout the night we kept our watch while our good neighbours, orthodox and sceptical alike, on the other side their shining windows snored in comfortable and decorous ignorance, slumbered then and slumber now—I doubt if Death himself shall open their eyes.

It may be debated if this prodigy were visible outside of the Count's Wimbledon. At some miles distant the horsemen might appear like clouds, the city a cloud, and would call for little attention. Maybe (and the Count thinks it) some solitary astrologer at a window wielded a telescope; some boy watching, ate apples. But, of all men, none could have deeper joy of the thing than the Count. Perhaps it were not amiss to the military reader here to be presented with the Count's full diagrams, and technical utterances, relating to the event; but so abstruse were his explanations, so voluble and incoherent (and so drastic) his censures and approofs, his charts so profoundly 'impressionistic,' that I despaired even of understanding them, far more of fitly and authoritatively setting them down. Wherefore this account is brief and merely my own. The end of the matter I may not know; even the cause of the battle is hid from me. The Count was afterwards cocksure of the city's victory. It is better known to them who blackened her walls and kept watch; to her king himself.

The vision faded with the stars in the East-South-East, and was put out at the coming of day. At the first doubtful peep of dawn's grey eye the city seemed to tremble and the horsemen to wax pale, as a cheek grows pale with fear. We sorrowfully watched their passing. Erelong the tyrant sun, preceded by a garish retinue, rose in the East, and the city with her history and her people and her wonder, as she had come out of the night, went forth into the day, and we saw her no more. Maybe the combatants fought on, and the world left them behind; maybe they are superior inhabitants of far places and will appear to us no more; but perhaps, if like monsters in the deep seas we shall watch in patience for the repassing of such craft sailing in silence our long nights, our expectations will be not altogether vain. Now, however, morning smoke was rising; London was out of bed; and moonsmen and nightsmen had disappeared as they were mere creatures of the imagination.

The Count was very cold and nigh helpless. 'I have seen the sign,' said he anagogically. 'What heroes! what a fight! My brothers in arms in the to be.' He chafed his gouty fingers and continued with emotion, 'We have seen—you and I. Valhalla! Dust to——? Ha! that Rascal besashed, that Pressgangsman.' He fetched a deep breath. 'Now, ma'am, and you, sir,' he added, with kindly nods to our fellow-watchers, ''tis nipping and raw, pray walk in.' We entered the house together. The Count walked in upon the musician's arm, deploring as he went the silence of the night. 'What did it lack say I?—a band, my friend—a skyey drum-and-fife band. Think on't—drum-taps like cowards' teeth, a brazen war-blast out of the sky deeps.' 'Fireworks without the pop,' replied the musician, more than confident after his fears. 'Ah, sir, I perceive you are a man of the world,' said the Count. The musician tittered.

The Count's visitors were hospitably regaled with rum-and-water. The musician, before his departure, entertained us with a tune. Soon they were gone away with a bit of silver in their pockets, not bound, I trust, for a lunatic asylum. The Count and I tried vainly to converse upon topics befitting the breakfast table. We eyed each other askance, each suspicious of the other's credulity. Conversation was flat and unprofitable, and the ingressive sun a sorry mockery. Optimism is not unfrequently the harbinger of pessimism.

At the first stir of the housekeeper's rising the Count made morosely for bed.

WALTER RAMAL.